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"We make no choice among the varied paths where art and letters seek for truth."

A REMINISCENCE OF GEORGE INNESS

BY ELLIOTT DAINGERFIELD

With illustrations from the works of the late George Inness.

To a young man in any of the professions it is an event of no little importance when he is brought into close contact with one who has already achieved fame, and the loftiest position his profession offers. It was with a certain exaltation, a quickened hopefulness, that I met George Inness in the early days of '85, when his own power was reaching its summit, and his works were glowing with that unusual lustre which makes them the most dignified efforts in American Art.

When, for the first few weeks of my acquaintance, he failed to remember me—even the very name was lost to him—there was in my mind no sense of resentment. One with quick perception could readily see that Inness had no interest in



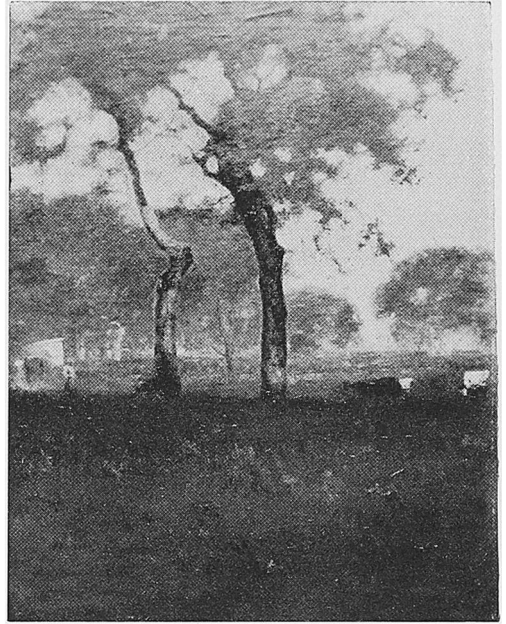
BUST OF GEORGE INNESS BY
J. SCOTT HARTLEY



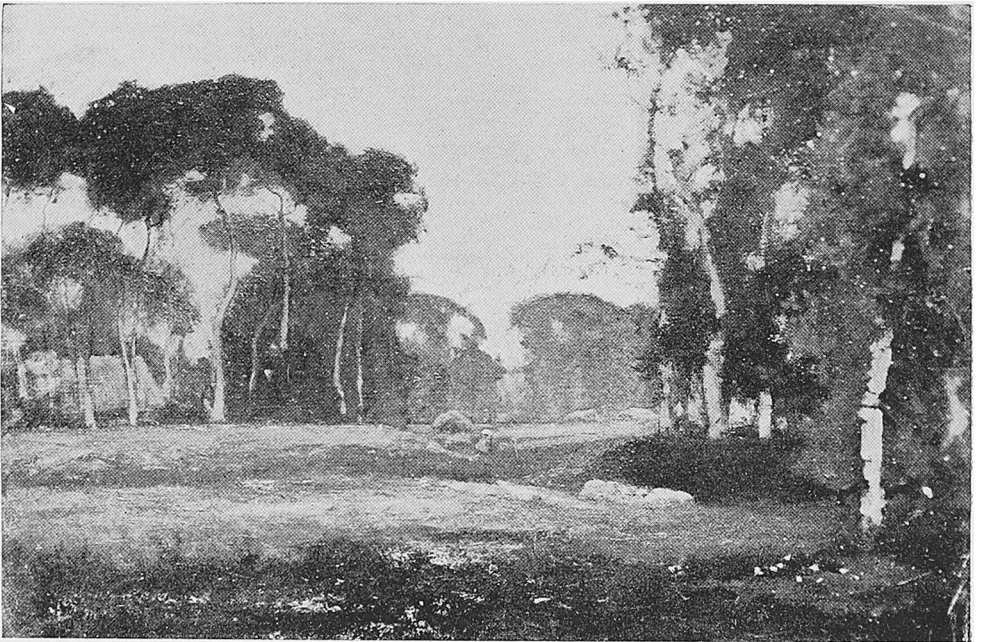
THE OLD VETERAN

the external man—he was often unconscious of himself : the real *ego* was that great striving quantity unseen with eyes, the soul, the heart, the brain of a man, and through the expressions of these, only, could he discover himself or recognize the individuality in another. Day after day, I went into his studio, only two doors removed from my own, and there, watching the progress of numerous canvases in silence, and with the sort of reverence one must feel in the presence of genius, grew up a knowledge of the man and the mighty engine of his mind, its purposes and achievements, which will ever remain a heritage of strength in the struggles of my own life.

Invincible, is perhaps the one word which defines George Inness's character. Arrogant, he has been called, but falsely ; egotistical, selfish, and all the other phrases that unsuccessful jealous minds usually apply to those who are intolerant of false effort, and falser success, in the fields where alone Truth is the aim and Truth the goal. Never once, in all my long acquaintance with him, have I known Inness satisfied with a work of



IN CALIFORNIA

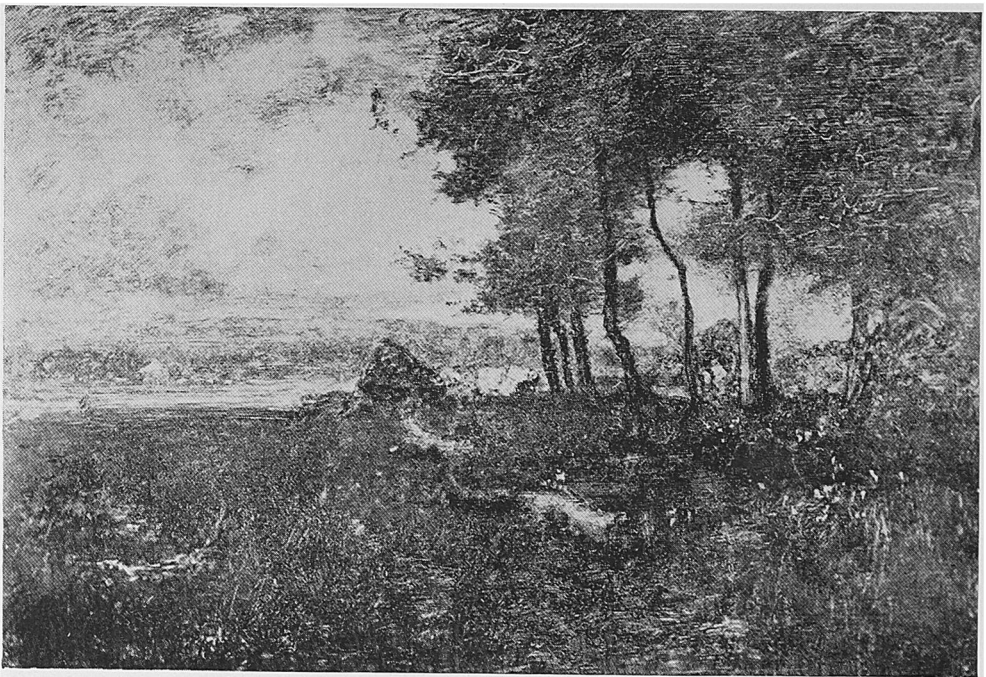


AT ETRETAT, NORMANDY

his own. Times without number I have seen a new light flash in his eye ; a quick eager toss of the head and thrusting back of the hair, when some problem with which he had been struggling for days or months—perhaps years—was yielding under the sway of his fierce energy ; then it was he gave vent to those expressions of satisfaction which have been called conceit ; but, mark you, when the morning came, or the new mood, be that canvas never so fine if one thing there jarred on the man's artistic sensibility he attacked it with all the old enthusiasm, with a dogged determination to bring it to his own high standard.

This spirit absolves him forever from all charges of vanity. The pleading of friends, artists, or buyers availed nothing. His creed was ever to make his work more perfect ; and it is a truth well attested, that, however beautiful the first attempt might have been, the completed work was almost always the finer. It was in such struggles that Inness conquered his limitations and grew into the powerful, virile, and poetic painter we now see him.

His moods were so well known to me that I could readily tell from his very knock at my door whether I was to be taken off across the hall to his studio, to view some great advance in his picture, or whether he was to drop into a chair in silence for a while, worn, tired, and with that depression of spirit which only the artistic nature can understand. At such a time, one word upon some abstract theme, no matter what, if really serious, would stir him into life and intense speech. It would not be argument, as between two ; for, when Inness talked, the flame needed no draught. It blazed and flared until his own conclusions were reached, and then faded, even as the glow on some of his own forest trees seems to fade in the twilight time, until the deep silence left no room for speech. Nor were his arguments always carried to logical sequence : what mattered it ? Does the storm

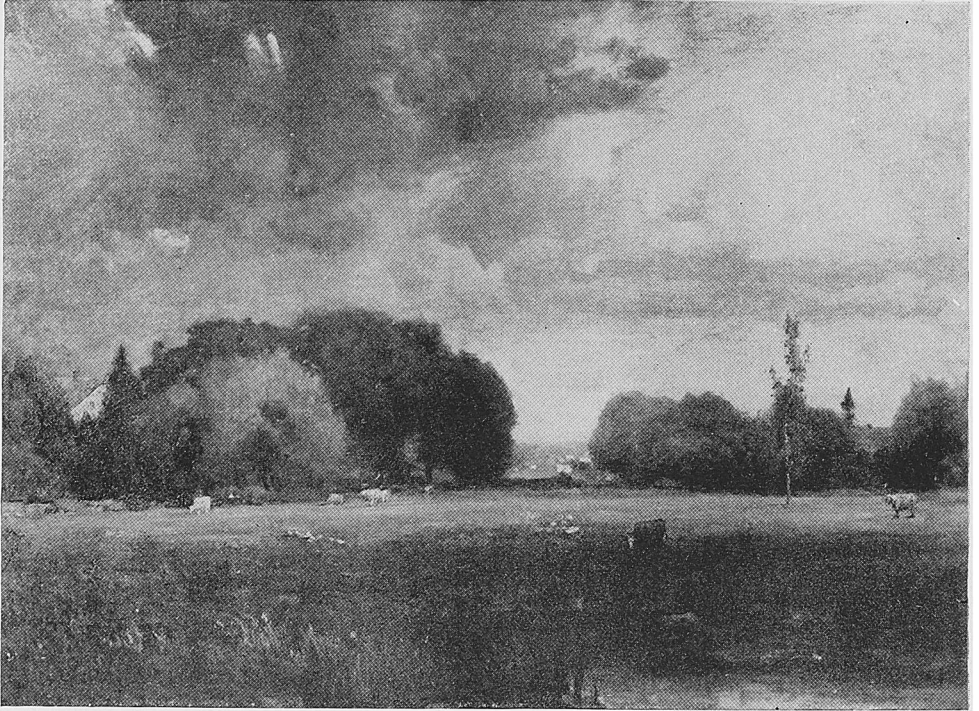


A LANDSCAPE NEAR ETRETAT, NORMANDY

forever sweep across the exact field you or I have chosen for its path? The rush and go of it were all there and the interest. If there were sympathy, which means understanding, in the listener's soul, these monologues of his yielded many great truths to him.

He came into my studio one day, with all the unrest and nervous eagerness which characterized him when thinking intensely; threw out several sentences about his picture, his purpose in it, etc., then with a sort of mad rush he said:

"What's it all about? What does it mean—this striving—this everlasting painting, painting, painting away one's life? What is Art? That's the question I've been asking myself, and I've answered it this way:" (I drew a writing pad to

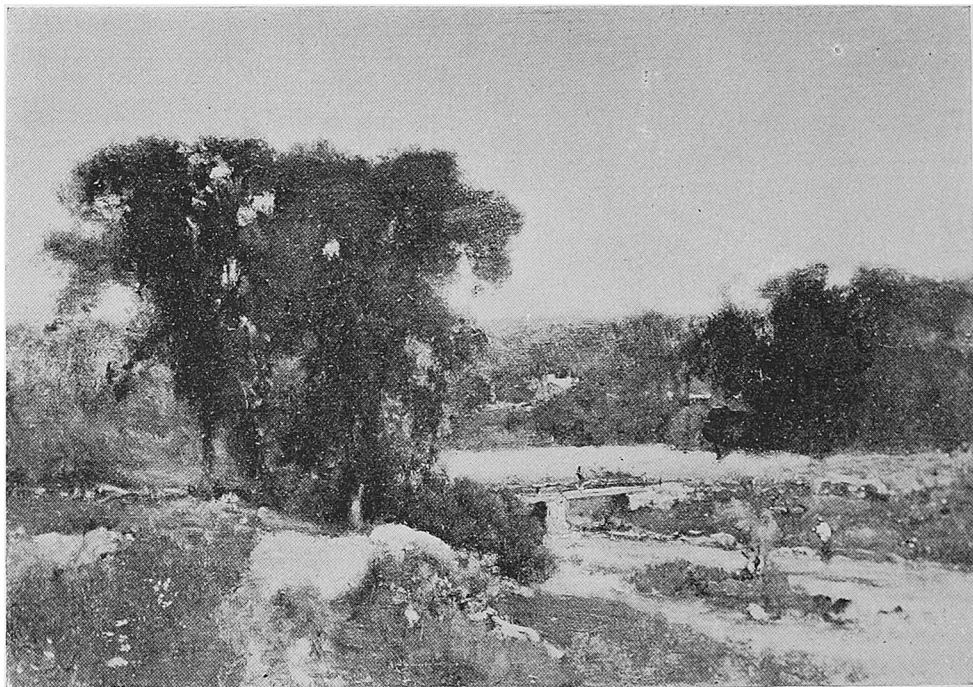


MEDFIELD MEADOWS, NEAR BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

me, and jotted down his words; they are worth thinking about oftener than once.) "Art is the endeavor on the part of Mind (Mind being the creative faculty), to express, through the senses, ideas of the great principles of unity."

Perhaps no more characteristic sentence has ever been recorded of him. It satisfied him. He had made his conclusion and expressed it. He did not propose to supply us with brains to understand what the "principles of unity" may be. We might struggle as we pleased with that problem, as perhaps he had struggled with the other, although to a tyro the last seems exactly the same as the first. Art, Religion, and the Single Tax Theory were his chief themes, and, by a curiously interesting weaving, his logic could make all three one and the same thing.

Oblivious to externals, both of persons and things, he often said and did much that evoked harsh criticism, but at heart, it may be truthfully said, he was as gentle as a child, even tender, and swiftly sympathetic. What a delight it was to watch



MEADOWS AT MILTON-ON-THE-HUDSON

him paint when in one of those impetuous moods which so often possessed him. The colors were almost never mixed ;—he had his blue theories, black, umber, and



ON ARTISTS' BROOK, NORTH CONWAY, NEW HAMPSHIRE



A PASTURE AT DURHAM, CONNECTICUT

in earlier days bitumen : he even had an orange-chrome phase. With a great mass of color he attacked the canvas, spreading it with incredible swiftness, marking in the great masses with a skill and method all his own, and impossible to imitate ; here, there, all over the canvas, rub, rub, dig, scratch, until the very brushes seemed to rebel, spreading their bristles as fiercely as they did in the days of yore along the spine of their porcine possessor.

But stand here, fifteen feet away. What a marvelous change is there ! A great rolling billowy cloud sweeping across the blue expanse, graded with such subtle skill over the undertone. Vast trees with sunlight flecking their trunks, meadows, ponds—mere suggestions, but beautiful ; foregrounds filled with detail, where there had been no apparent effort to produce it, delicate flowers scratched in with the thumb-nail or handle of the brush. One's imagination was so quickened that it supplied all the finish needed.

Inness used to say that his forms were at the tips of his fingers, just as the alphabet was at the end of the tongue. Surely it was true, and when he "struck a snag," as he called it, and he almost always did (I used to think sometimes, for the fun of the struggle that was to follow) 'twas in the *construction* of his picture, not in any mere matter of painting. He would find out where the "hitch" was and then go on.

Under excitement of this kind he could do most astounding things. One morning a frame came in which had been mismeasured ; he sent for a canvas to fit it, rapidly sketched in a composition, and produced one of the most limpid, lovely pieces of pure sunlight I have ever seen him paint. But, alas ! he said there was a "hitch," and subsequent labor transformed it—one of the rare cases when I wish "well enough" had been let alone.

I once had the good fortune to paint a little picture that pleased him ; he caught sight of it lying on the floor against the wall and exclaimed :

"Hello, who did that ?"

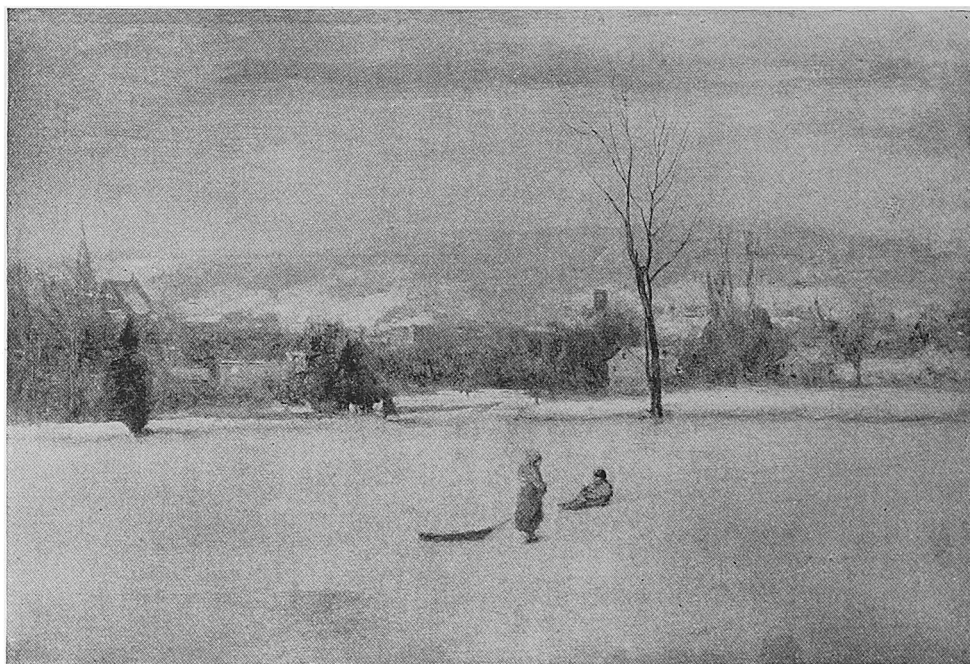
I told him. Stooping down he caught it up, pushed his glasses far back on his head, and examined it, with many expressions that I remember with deep satisfaction, put it down and walked out of the room. The next morning he came in again, and, taking up the picture, asked : "What do you expect to get for that ?" I mentioned a price, thinking he meant to advise some one to buy it, but he answered at once, "I'll take it," walked to the desk, and made out a check.

Then, as if he meant to aid me still farther up the hill, he caught up my palette and brushes, and for an hour painted at a figure picture, which I had thought finished, to show me "how" it ought to be done. I have never touched that picture. It remains a souvenir of the day I had my biggest lesson in art, and I value and feel the importance of every word he then said.

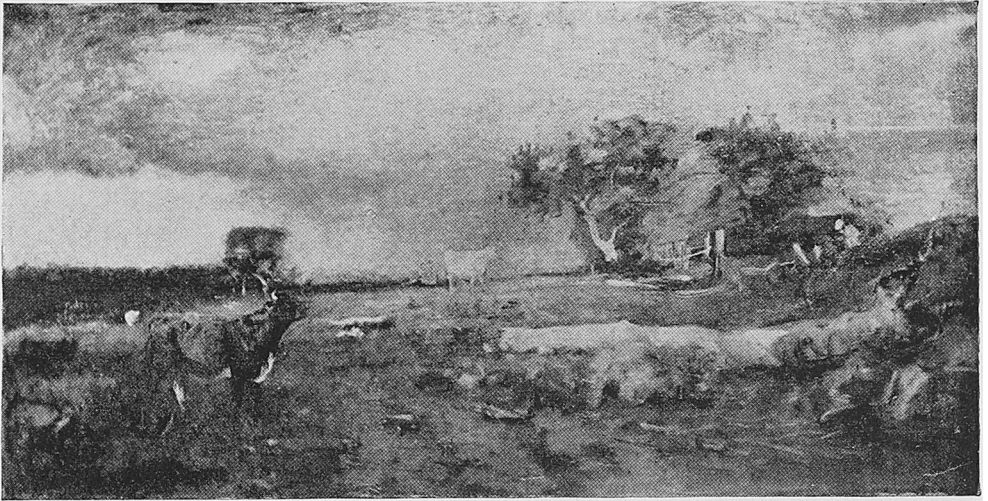
It was not always, however, that he was so interested, or so complimentary. Years after I undertook a picture which had a line of rail-fence running down to the foreground ; he saw it and objected somewhat to the arrangement. I undertook to argue the point, and said, "Why can't I have it that way, if it pleases me ?" "So you can," was his answer, "if you want to be a d——d idiot." I changed the fence.

So incident upon incident might be multiplied of this strange, erratic, always artistic nature, that forever lived at white heat, unveiling in vast waves his visions of color, tone, and grandeur of line, until we were drawn nearer to the nature he loved, and in his art perceived the earnest seeker after Truth.

With the works of all the great painters he had a profound acquaintance, and an analytical as well as synthetic knowledge. His admiration for the really great



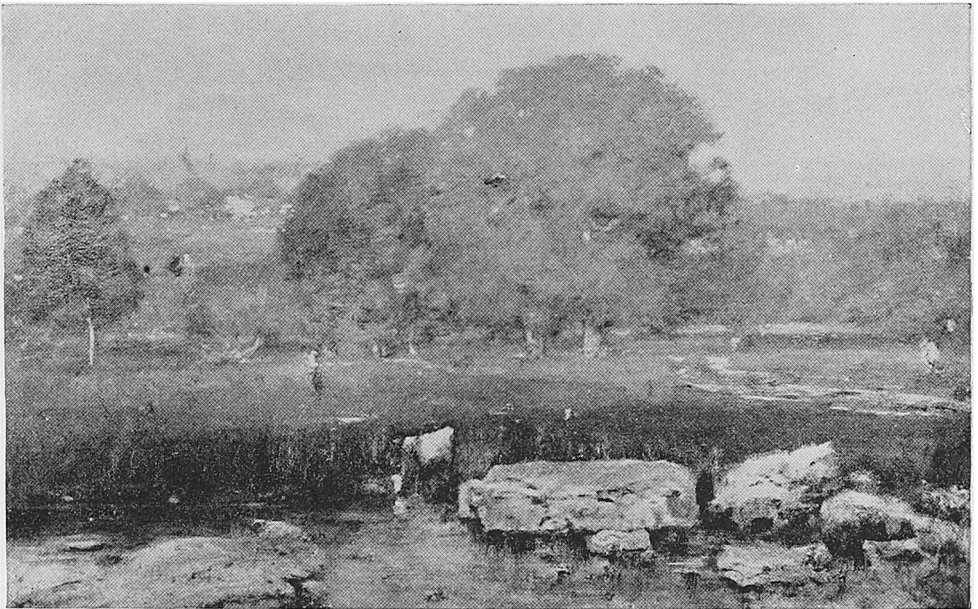
A WINTER-SCENE FROM INNESS'S HOME AT MONTCLAIR, NEW JERSEY



THE COMING STORM

results was sincere and often enthusiastic. For the evanescent, soap-bubble successes in art, he had no toleration, and with a force quite irresistible he pointed out the fallacy in efforts which were the result of mere skill, or a certain jugglery in color, brush-work, or what not. "Limitation there must be in art," he would say; "how hopeless it all seems when we look at nature."

For Titian, Angelo, Raphael, Rembrandt and many others of the great men, he was unstinting in praise. To make a landscape as perfect in its unity as a portrait by Rembrandt was an ever-present ideal. Rousseau, Millet, Corot, Constable, Turner and Claude, he quoted often as being at the head of the list, and, perceiv-



THE RED OAK

ing their faults, as he often did, their merits never escaped him. Of the great Englishman he said hard things for his brutality and "stupidity," although to certain works, such as the "Pier at Calais," he gave unlimited praise. As his own ideals were high, so was his condemnation of all failure or frivolity of intention severe, often bitter, but not unjust.

No reminiscence of Inness would be complete without some mention of his great power as a colorist, for all his philosophy, all his many-sided nature, seemed to express itself in the fulness and beauty of color. We are not to make comparisons with the work of others—that were needless, Inness's color was his own. The early morning, with its silver, tender tones, offered him as great opportunity for the expression of what he called "fulness of color" as did the open glare of the



THE OLD STONE WALL

noonday, or the fiery bursts of sunset. Mention has been made of his different color-moods, and one fairly held the breath to see him spread with unrelenting fury a broad scumble of orange-chrome over the most delicate, subtle, gray effect, in order to get more "fulness;" and still more strange was it to see, by a mysterious technical use of black or blue, the same tender silver morning unfold itself, but stronger, firmer, fuller in its tone quality. "One must use pure color," he would say: "the picture must be so constructed that the 'local' of every color can be secured, whether in the shadow or the light." Many of his canvases are criticised because of an over-greenness, or an intensity of the blues, but deeper study shows the man's principle, for which he strove with the whole force of his nature. A perfect balance of color quality everywhere in the picture. The mass of offending green will be found to balance perfectly with the mass of gray or blue of the sky. So that the whole canvas, viewed with that perceptive power without

which there is no justice in either the criticism or the critic, becomes an harmonious balance, with all the intensity of his powerful palette. Inness maintained that the "middle tone" was the secret of all success in color—he strove for it until the end, and so great was his effort that the latest works are but waves of wonderful color, marvellous and mysterious—the very essence of the beauty of nature. When he chose to put aside his theories and produce a "tone study," following the habit of those masters who have glorified modern French art, he was as subtle as any of them, and far less labored; but it is in his very intensity that he has preserved his individuality, and if we are to understand him aright, we must study him from his own standpoint. In his earlier life his drawing was precise, and accurate to a wonderful degree, being elaborated to the very verge of the horizon.

In the beginning Inness strove for knowledge with most untiring effort. His early pictures are full of intricate, elaborate detail; 'twas thus he gained that knowledge of forms which put them at his finger-tips. Always, however, there was the largeness of perception which enabled him to understand masses, and divide his compositions into just proportions of light and shade; and under all, one saw the poet and the philosopher. Painfully objective as were these early efforts, they were tasks along the great highway which at last led him to those heights whence he saw and understood the *subjective* in nature, and expressed it in his art.

Analytical, profoundly so, when he chose to be, with increasing years his art grew more and more synthetic, and the very latest works are most so of all, and strangely beautiful in the total elimination of needless detail, and sure grasp of *idea*. His art became at that time a sort of soul-language, which, if you have not the speech, you may not understand, but it is none the less beautiful. To-day we are at too near a view. Let us await the coming years, he will then need no defence.



THE LATE SUNSET